

**Monday 12/21/20**

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Britain, France May Not Reach Agreement Over Reopening Border Tonight - Report  
by [Mary F.](#)

Several countries have shut their borders to Britain - including France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Austria, Ireland, Belgium and Canada - over fears about a new, highly infectious COVID-19 strain identified in the UK that may be associated with faster spread of the disease. Countries across the globe continued to close their borders to Britain after health experts revealed last week that a new variant of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, has emerged in the country.

France has closed down its border to arrivals of people and trucks from Britain whether by road, air, sea or rail, shutting down one of the most vital trade arteries, the port of Dover, with mainland Europe, [Reuters reported](#). The [port of Dover](#), the nearest English port to France, was also shut down, causing miles of truck backups. The ban was scheduled to be in place for 48 hours starting Sunday.

UK Transport Secretary Grant Shapps on Monday said it was somewhat surprising that France had shut down its border to freight, [according to The Guardian](#).

A Monday report by the BBC said that Britain and France may not reach an agreement over reopening their borders by Monday night, which may lead to continued travel mayhem and even food shortages just days before Britain is set to leave the European Union.

India, Pakistan, Poland, Spain, Switzerland, Sweden, Russia, Jordan and Hong Kong have suspended travel for Britons after UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson revealed that a highly contagious, mutated variant of the coronavirus had been found in the country. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Oman shut down their borders completely.

On Monday, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo urged the US government to take proactive actions to prevent the new COVID-19 strain from entering the US. New York is among the states hit hardest by the disease, [with more than 36,500](#) COVID-19-related deaths.

"It's high time the federal government takes swift action, because today that variant is getting on a plane and landing in JFK, and all it takes is one person," Cuomo said, according to Reuters. The new COVID-19 variant is believed to be 70% more contagious than other variants, Johnson revealed Saturday evening.

"It is with a very heavy heart, I must tell you we cannot continue with Christmas as planned," Johnson [said on Saturday](#). "There's no evidence that it causes more severe illness or higher mortality, but it does appear to be passed on significantly more easily. And although there's considerable uncertainty, it may be up to 70% more transmissible than the original version of the disease."

According to Muge Cevik, an infectious disease expert at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland and a scientific adviser to the British government, the 70% estimate is based on modeling and has not been confirmed by lab experiments, [the New York Times reported](#). The identification of the new strain comes just days after the UK and the US began their COVID-19 vaccination campaigns. Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine was approved by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) earlier this month, and Moderna's vaccine was [approved on Friday](#). The UK approved Pfizer's vaccine early in December, and Moderna's vaccine is awaiting approval by the country.

According to the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO), whenever a virus replicates, it slightly changes. Such changes are referred to as "mutations."

Although SARS-CoV-2 changes more slowly than other viruses like HIV or influenza due to an internal "proofreading mechanism" that corrects mistakes when the virus replicates, it still has the ability to mutate. Most mutations do not affect the properties of the virus. However, they occasionally "result in a virus variant that is better adapted to its environment compared to the original virus."

"In that case, it can become dominant in a specific environment. This process of selection of successful variants is called 'viral evolution' and this is a natural process all viruses go through," the WHO explains.

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US Guided-Missile Submarine Enters Persian Gulf Ahead of Soleimani's Death Anniversary by [Mary F.](#)

Tension between the US and Iran has been high since the US assassinated top Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) Quds Force, in Iraq on January 3, 2020.

Relations between Washington and Tehran took a turn for the worse this week after the guided-missile submarine USS Georgia entered the Persian Gulf through the Strait of Hormuz on Monday in the US' latest deterrence mission against Iran. The submarine was accompanied by two American warships, the US Navy confirmed.

"The nuclear-power Ohio-class guided-missile submarine USS Georgia (SSGN 729), along with the guided-missile cruisers USS Port Royal (CG 73) and USS Philippine Sea (CG 58), transited the Strait of Hormuz entering the Arabian Gulf," [the Navy said in a statement](#).

The submarine's entrance into the Persian Gulf comes amid heightened tensions with Iran, especially after US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo blamed Iranian-backed militias for a rocket attack on the US Embassy compound in Baghdad on Sunday. According to [NPR](#), which cited US diplomatic sources, the attack killed at least one local civilian. However, no embassy personnel were killed or injured in the attack.

In a recent statement, the US Embassy in Baghdad condemned the attack, calling it a "violation of international law" and an assault on the "sovereignty of the Iraqi government," NPR reported.



"We call on all Iraqi political and governmental leaders to take steps to prevent such attacks and hold accountable those responsible," the statement adds.

In a Sunday statement, Pompeo also denounced the attacks.

"The United States strongly condemns the latest attack by Iran-backed militias on the International Zone in Baghdad," [Pompeo said](#).

"We wish those hurt a speedy recovery," he added.

A Navy official confirmed to [Fox News](#) that the latest warship movements in the Persian Gulf were "long planned" as the anniversary of Soleimani's death approaches and were not conducted in response to the embassy attack.

Iran's relations with the US and other countries have been especially strained following last month's killing of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, a senior Iranian scientist who helped lead the country's nuclear program.

The top nuclear scientist was [killed by gunfire east of Tehran](#). Iran's Supreme National Security Agency has said that Israeli spy agency Mossad and the People's Mujahedin Organization, an Iranian political-militant group banned in the country, were involved in the assassination.

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Poll: 59% of US Voters Say It's 'Likely' Trump Will Run Again in 2024  
by [Mary F.](#)

The Electoral College last week confirmed Joe Biden as the US' next president, ratifying his November victory. Meanwhile, President Donald Trump has yet to concede to and has indicated he has no intention of doing so.

A [new Hill-HarrisX poll](#) has found that the majority of US voters think it "likely" that Trump will run for the White House again in 2024. Specifically, the poll - conducted online among 3,799 registered voters from December 10 through December 14 - found that 59% of respondents said it is somewhat or very likely that Trump will run again in four years.

On the other hand, 41% of study participants said that it is very or somewhat unlikely that Trump will run for president again in 2024.

The poll also found that 68% of Republican voters believe that Trump will run again, compared to 59% of independents who hold the same notion. Meanwhile, 50% of Democratic voters said it was likely Trump would run again, with the remaining 50% saying it was not likely.

Another [Hill-HarrisX survey](#) conducted between November 17 and November 19 found that 47% of voters would support Trump running again in four years. However, 53% objected to another presidential run by Trump.

Trump has yet to yield to Biden, tweeting on November 23 that he would "never concede" in what he referred to as the "most corrupt election in American political history."

"What does GSA [General Services Administration] being allowed to preliminarily work with the Dems have to do with continuing to pursue our various cases on what will go down as the most corrupt election in American political history?" Trump wrote at the time.

In addition, there have been reports that Trump has floated the idea of running for president again in 2024. According to [one person close to the White House cited by The Hill](#), Trump has told some people he will run again in four years.

Another person close to the Trump campaign told the outlet that Trump may “dance” with the idea of running for president in 2024 to generate media attention that might help boost his business pursuits, but they predicted that Trump would not actually try for another term.

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‘A Bit Presumptuous and Arrogant’ to Assume Aliens Don’t Exist, Former CIA Chief Says  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The former head of the US’ Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) recently said it was reasonable to assume that alien life exists in the universe and might be visiting our planet.

John Brennan, who served as CIA director between 2013 and 2017 and as White House homeland security adviser before that, made the remarks to US economist Tyler Cowen [on the latter’s podcast last week](#).

The issue came up when Cowen asked how a CIA analyst would approach a video of an unidentified flying object (UFO), like [those released last year that show US Navy pilots](#) closely tracking mysterious flying objects.

“I’ve seen some of those videos from Navy pilots, and I must tell you that they are quite eyebrow-raising when you look at them,” Brennan said. He noted the first task in analyzing evidence of that kind is to eliminate possible natural phenomena. “You really have to approach it with an open mind, but get as much data as possible and get as much expertise as possible brought to bear,” he noted.

However, he wouldn’t discount the possibility that some UFOs are of intelligent, extraterrestrial origin.

“When people talk about it, is there other life besides what’s in the [United] States, in the world, the globe? Life is defined in many different ways. I think it’s a bit presumptuous and arrogant for us to believe that there’s no other form of life anywhere in the entire universe. What that might be is subject to a lot of different views,” Brennan noted.

“I think some of the phenomena we’re going to be seeing continues to be unexplained and might, in fact, be some type of phenomenon that is the result of something that we don’t yet understand and that could involve some type of activity that some might say constitutes a different form of life,” he added.

Nick Pope, a former employee and UFO investigator for the UK’s Ministry of Defense, told Fox News Brennan’s comments were “intriguing.”

“When I first heard the interview I thought he was going to play it safe, and his mention of weather phenomena reinforced that view,” [Pope told Fox News on Monday](#).

“But for him then to start speculating about something people ‘might say constitutes a different form of life’ was extraordinary. While it may have been a slip of the tongue and an inadvertent muddling of tenses, I was also fascinated to hear him mention not just the previous US Navy



UFO sightings, but 'some of the phenomena we're going to be seeing,' as if he was talking about future events," he added.

For the CIA, the issue of UFOs is hardly hypothetical. In 1978, the agency [declassified a slew of documents revealing](#) its probing of UFO cases since the 1940s. Earlier this year, US President [Donald Trump teased that he might order more materials](#) on UFO investigations declassified, including the infamous 1947 Roswell incident.

In August, [CNN reported, citing unnamed defense sources](#), that the Pentagon was opening its own task force for investigating UFO sightings. However, it, too, has a long history of tracking UFOs. In 1969, the US Air Force announced its Project Blue Book had concluded UFOs were totally irrelevant to national security and weren't alien craft. However, the effort to track and understand UFO phenomena reportedly secretly continued under the aegis of other names, such as the Advanced Aviation Threat Identification Program that began in 2009 and which the [Pentagon said ended in 2012](#).

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China's Chang'e-5 Orbiter Embarks on New Mission to Mysterious Gravitationally Stable Space by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Having finished its primary mission, the part of China's Chang'e-5 spacecraft that remained in space has departed for a new mission: exploring an unusual area of space known as a Lagrangian point.

On December 16, the orbiter vehicle performed the final task of its primary mission when it [dropped off the capsule carrying samples from the lunar surface](#). The capsule plunged back to Earth, being recovered by Chinese scientists in Inner Mongolia for analysis.

However, that wasn't the end of the orbiter's mission. Hu Hao, the chief designer of the sample return phase of the Chang'e-5 mission, [told China Central Television \(CCTV\) on Sunday](#) that the orbiter had performed an avoidance burn so as not to crash into the Earth's atmosphere, and was now beginning a new mission to one of the Earth-sun Lagrangian points.

In every two-body system, there are five points where the gravitational force of the two objects is equal, making it possible for other objects to exist there with minimal influence from the two others. They've proven to be valuable for research, with [China placing the Queqiao communications satellite](#) at the Earth-moon L2 Lagrangian point, which sits on the far side of the moon, to provide a link to missions on that side of the moon such as the Chang'e-4 mission in 2019.

While Hu declined to give specifics about which Earth-sun Lagrangian point the spacecraft was headed to, amateur astronomers have suggested that based on its trajectory in recent days, it seems likely that Chang'e-5 is headed to the L1 point, which is directly between the Earth and the sun.

The L1 point is about four times more distant from the Earth than the moon's orbit is, and it offers an unobstructed view of the sun. Humans have placed several solar observatory satellites here over the years, including [DSCOVR, WIND, SOHO and ACE, according to NASA](#).

Hu noted the Chang'e-5 orbiter still has a substantial amount of propellant fuel left, meaning it will be able to continue maneuvering for some time.

[SpaceNews noted this isn't the first Chinese mission](#) to follow this pattern: in 2010, the Chang'e-2 spacecraft, which orbited and mapped the moon, continued on to visit the Earth-sun L2 point to test the abilities of ground command to track and direct the spacecraft. L2 is located "behind" the Earth at the same distance L1 is.

The US space agency NASA is preparing a mission to one of Jupiter's Lagrangian points as well. At the L3 and L4 points, planets tend to collect "Trojan" asteroids and other space debris, which orbit the sun ahead of and behind it. [The LUCY spacecraft, due to launch](#) sometime in late 2021, will visit eight of Jupiter's Trojans over a 12-year period. The asteroids are believed to be captured Kuiper Belt objects, originating from the remote part of the solar system beyond Neptune's orbit.

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Photos: Astronomy Enthusiasts Snap Shots of Rare 'Great Conjunction' of Jupiter, Saturn by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The last time such an event occurred, Mongolian conqueror Genghis Khan was still alive, and another pass this close isn't likely for another 800 years. Of course, it's all just a trick of the eye, thanks to the fact that astronomers are viewing the planets from Earth.

As the planets Jupiter and Saturn make their historic "great conjunction" on Monday, amateur astronomers are snapping incredible photos of the two gas giants.

On Monday, the outer planets of Jupiter and Saturn will appear incredibly close together in the night sky - so close that, to the naked eye, they will seem to be a single bright star. While such a conjunction happens roughly every 20 years or so, the last time they appeared this close was more than 800 years ago.

In reality, the planets are not physically any closer to each other than they normally are; the conjunction is only possible for a viewer here on Earth, thanks to a perspective phenomenon called "parallax."

As night falls around the world, astronomers are taking to their backyards and dark hilltops with their telescopes and cameras and snapping photos of the two planets so close together, each of which are also favorites for amateurs to spot.

The photos are made all the more stunning thanks to the incredible brightness of the giant planets' largest moons, which hold an important place in the history of science. Jupiter's four large moons Callisto, Europa, Ganymede and Io, all visible in the photos, were discovered by Italian physicist Galileo Galilei in 1610 - the first moons ever spotted by humans other than our own. Their discovery was a major blow to the geocentric theory, which proposed that the entire



universe revolves around the Earth. [Saturn's huge moon Titan](#) was spotted 45 years later by Dutch astronomer Christiaan Huygens.

[Europa and Titan are both candidates](#) for possible extraterrestrial life, and NASA has proposed missions to both moons to find out.

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US Prosecutors Unveil Charges Against Alleged Libyan Bomb-Maker in 1988 Lockerbie Tragedy  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Marking the 32nd anniversary of the 1988 Lockerbie bombing, outgoing US Attorney General William Barr announced new charges in the decades-old case that grew deeply personal for the official over the years. Both Barr and former special counsel Robert Mueller played instrumental roles during investigations into the devastating incident.

The US Department of Justice announced Monday that a pair of charges had been filed against Abu Agila Mohammad Masud, who prosecutors allege made the explosive device that downed Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland.

The DoJ's announcement notes that [Masud has been charged](#) with single counts of destruction of aircraft resulting in death and destruction of vehicle used in interstate or foreign commerce by means of an explosive resulting in death.

Masud is currently in Libyan custody and serving a separate 10-year sentence in Tripoli. US officials have expressed their intentions to seek his extradition; however, it's unclear if Libyan officials will be allowing Masud's transfer to the US. Barr [noted during a conference](#) that the possibility of a trial in the US seemed "very good."

Prosecutors [revealed through a 26-page affidavit](#) from FBI agent Rachel Otto that Masud was tapped in the winter of 1988 by an unidentified Libyan intelligence official to take part in the construction of a bomb. Masud had been told to travel to Malta, where he met up with two Libyan intelligence operatives - Abdel Basset al-Megrahi and Al-Amin Khalifa Fhimah - who later directed him to set the timer on the explosive device so that it would detonate 11 hours later, according to the document.

Masud allegedly planted the ticking device inside a Samsonite suitcase that was previously provided by the unidentified Libyan intelligence official and met with Megrahi and Fhimah at Malta's Luqa Airport on December 21, 1988. Masud reportedly handed the suitcase to Fhimah, who then placed the suitcase on a conveyor belt. The explosive device flew from Malta to West Germany and then to England, where it was transferred onto doomed Pan Am Flight 103 at London's Heathrow Airport.

After making the drop, Masud allegedly returned to Libya and after a few days met with the late Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi, who "thanked him and other members of the team for their successful attack on the United States," according to the affidavit. Months later, Gadhafi reportedly reiterated his gratitude to both Masud and Fhimah.

The latest revelations were reportedly made during a 2012 interrogation by Libyan authorities trying to determine whether Masud had committed any crimes against the North African country during the 2011 Libyan crisis. The claims were later corroborated through evidence made available by Scottish and American officials throughout the years.

In a [statement accompanying the DoJ's announcement](#), Barr indicated that the charges are the result of work done by officials who have "remained resolute in their dogged pursuit of justice for our citizens, the citizens of the United Kingdom and the citizens of the other 19 countries that were murdered by terrorists" under the direction of Gadhafi.

"As to all the victims and the families, we cannot take away your pain from your loss, but we can seek justice for you. Our message to other terrorists around the world is this – you will not succeed – if you attack Americans, no matter where you are, no matter how long it takes, you will be pursued to the ends of the earth until justice is done."

The only individual who has been convicted for the 1988 bombing is Megrahi, who was later released on compassionate grounds after he was diagnosed with cancer. Megrahi died in 2012 and maintained his innocence. His family is currently [appealing his conviction](#). Fhimah was indicted in the incident but was acquitted.

The December 1988 bombing killed a total of 270 people, including 190 Americans. Eleven Scottish individuals were killed on the ground as the remnants of the plane fell onto a residential street in Lockerbie, Scotland. The incident is considered one of the deadliest terror attacks in the history of the UK.

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Fired US Cybersecurity Chief Admits Massive Hacking Attack 'Happened on My Watch'  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

A highly sophisticated malware campaign has struck a variety of US federal agencies as well as private companies, with officials recently finding that the compromise had its start in March, months ahead of the US presidential election.

Christopher Krebs, the since-fired director of the US' Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), recently acknowledged that the massive hacking incident officials are still trying to understand occurred during his time with the agency.

During a Sunday interview with journalist Jake Tapper on CNN's "State of the Union" show, [Krebs told the host](#) that "the way I look at it is, yes, it happened on my watch at CISA, and we missed it."

"A bunch of other folks missed it," he added, before shifting the conversation and underscoring that work needed to be done now to ensure such a blow to the US' cybersecurity network does not occur again in the future.

Reports of the hack did not begin to emerge until last week, despite the fact that it was later found hackers had infiltrated computer systems starting sometime in March. It was determined the massive operation was executed [through software company SolarWinds' Orion platform](#) and



saw cybersecurity setbacks for the US Departments of the Treasury, Commerce and Homeland Security, among dozens of other agencies and companies.

As more details have emerged, blame for the hacking attack has largely fallen on Russia. US President-elect Joe Biden's team of advisers have reportedly gone so far as to [brainstorm a variety of options](#) "to punish" Russia. Some options are said to include sanctions and cyberattacks against Moscow.

Krebs also jumped in on the Russia blame game, telling Tapper that he's concluded Moscow played a role in the campaign based on details and information he's heard from intelligence experts.

"They are exceptionally good at this, particularly the foreign intelligence service - the SVR," he said. "They're good, they're quiet, they're deliberate, they're patient, and they're careful."

"I think we're just getting our arms around the scope [of the cyberattack]," the former US government official said. Krebs added he did not believe sensitive government information was leaked.

Krebs was dismissed from his post in mid-November after he stated that no voter fraud or other interference was detected in the US election, a fact that US President Donald Trump has refused to accept.

Russia has [sternly rejected any accusation](#) that it played a role in the cyberattack. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov released remarks on the matter Monday, stating, "Any accusations of Russia's involvement are absolutely unfounded and are a continuation of the kind of blind Russophobia that is resorted to following any incident."

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US Health Agency to Examine Causes of Severe Allergic Reactions to Pfizer's COVID-19 Vaccine  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

A new study on allergic reactions to the COVID-19 vaccine comes as hundreds of thousands of Americans have been inoculated against the respiratory disease and as officials begin to ship out millions of doses of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine.

The US National Institutes of Health is set to launch a new study to allow an in-depth examination into the rare but severe allergic reactions that, so far, only a handful of individuals have experienced since the deployment of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine.

The study is expected to specifically determine the component of the vaccine that is causing anaphylaxis, a potentially life-threatening allergic reaction that prompts a multi-system reaction that sees individuals struggle to breathe, become nauseous, experience dizziness and develop a rash.

Officials intend to recruit several hundred volunteers with a history of severe allergic reactions who will have the vaccine administered under close observation at multiple clinical sites across the US. Researchers have speculated that the severe reactions [may be prompted by](#)

[polyethylene glycol \(PEG\)](#), a medicinal compound of the vaccine that is also present in the newly approved Moderna drug.

Daniel Rotrosen, who serves as the director of the Division of Allergy, Immunology and Transplantation at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, [explained to The Washington Post](#) that the study would not be focusing solely on individuals with a PEG allergy, since it would be extremely difficult to find enough of them.

"This is not a simple study design," Rotrosen told the outlet. "We expect to be looking at highly allergic individuals. They will be not necessarily so easy to recruit, either. A lot still needs to be done to be sure we have the optimal study design. That said, we're trying to move as quickly as we can, for obvious reasons."

Although it's not written in stone just yet, officials hope to begin the study in the next few weeks. Urgency in starting the study was prompted after a [health care worker in Alaska](#) underwent multiple phases of anaphylaxis 10 minutes after receiving the Pfizer vaccine, despite having no history of allergies.

[The latest figures from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) state there have been at least six cases of anaphylaxis linked to the Pfizer vaccine after more than 272,000 doses of the two-part vaccine were administered.

The agency has issued warnings on the likelihood of a severe reaction and noted that anaphylaxis could present itself within one hour of being given the vaccine. The reaction is easily treated through the injection of epinephrine.

The development comes as several US officials, [including US President-elect Joe Biden](#), televised their inoculations in an effort to assure the American public that the Pfizer vaccine is safe for public consumption.

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Joe Biden Receives Pfizer's COVID-19 Vaccine in Delaware Hospital  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The latest moves by US President-elect Joe Biden come after top government officials such as Vice President Mike Pence and Surgeon General Jerome Adams were publicly vaccinated as part of a campaign to assure Americans of the vaccine's safety amid widespread skepticism. Biden received his first of two doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine on Monday during a televised event at Delaware's ChristianaCare Hospital. The event that took place on the same day that Moderna's vaccine began arriving at locations in several US states.

The president-elect stressed to viewers that he was undergoing immunization in order to "demonstrate that people should be prepared when it's available to take the vaccine."

"There's nothing to worry about. I'm looking forward to the second shot," he added, also noting that the Trump administration "deserves some credit getting [vaccine efforts] off the ground" through Operation Warp Speed.

Biden was accompanied by his wife Jill, who had received the vaccine earlier in the day.



Although Biden hailed the vaccine and its effectiveness against SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, he also took the opportunity at the event to tell Americans that countermeasures against the respiratory disease still need to be followed.

"It's going to take time," he stressed.

Biden's running mate Sen. Kamala Harris (D-CA) and her husband Doug Emhoff are expected to be vaccinated sometime next week.

At present, the rollouts of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are very much in the early stages, with doses being prioritized for first responders and nursing home staff and residents. Over [the weekend, it was suggested by health experts](#) that the next phase in vaccine deployment should see those aged 75 and older or frontline essential workers be next up to receive their first COVID-19 vaccine doses.

Both vaccines approved by the US Food and Drug Administration showed an efficacy of over 94% and require individuals to return to a health professional for a second dose to protect oneself against the disease.

The Biden event comes after several US officials, such as [Pence, Adams, US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi \(D-CA\) and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell \(R-KY\)](#), were vaccinated in recent days.

US President Donald Trump, who was previously diagnosed with COVID-19, has yet to receive the vaccine. Adams previously explained that Trump has not received the vaccine [because he was treated with monoclonal antibodies](#).

The latest data from Johns Hopkins University indicates that the US has [recorded nearly 18 million COVID-19 cases](#), having [added 189,099 as of Monday](#). US states California, Tennessee, New York, Texas and Florida have reported the highest daily case numbers.

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US Names New Official to Handle Human Rights, Democracy at State Dept. - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The US Department of State has selected a new official to handle the functions of promoting democracy and human rights, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo said in a statement.

"I am pleased to announce that I have designated Eric Ueland to assume the delegable authorities and functions of the Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy and Human Rights," Pompeo said in the statement on Monday.

Ueland will direct US global efforts to promote democracy and human rights throughout the world, Pompeo noted.

"With these authorities, Eric Ueland will lead our efforts to advance the security of the American people by assisting countries to build more democratic, secure, stable and just societies," he said.

Ueland previously served as a senior advisor for the Bureau of International Organization Affairs at the State Department. In November, Ueland became the Bureau's acting principal deputy assistant secretary.

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**Pennsylvania Man Charged With Using Mother's Identity to Vote for Trump- District Attorney**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - A Pennsylvania man was charged with voting for Donald Trump in the US presidential election in place of his deceased mother, District Attorney Jack Stollsteimer said in a statement.

"Our investigation has determined that Mr. Bartman intentionally and willfully violated our election laws by registering two deceased individuals as voters and completed his criminal acts by requesting and returning an Absentee Ballot for one of those individuals, his own mother, who died in 2008," Stollsteimer said on Monday.

Bartman, 70, signed up both deceased relatives as Republican voters. According to the statement, the defendant admitted his deed and explained that he sought to re-elect Trump. President Donald Trump's lawyers have alleged massive election and voter fraud in Pennsylvania and in other US states, including using deceased voters' identities to cast ballots in favor of the Democratic rival Joe Biden.

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**UPDATE - British Airways, Delta to Test UK Passengers to New York for Latest Coronavirus Strain**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - British Airways will test UK passengers flying to New York for the latest strain of the novel coronavirus, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo announced as Delta Air Lines announced it would do the same.

"I want to thank British Airways. This was a very rapid decision by them. They could have taken a different path, but they agreed to be cooperative and they said they will not send flights to JFK [airport] unless those people have been tested pre-boarding," Cuomo said on Monday.

The governor said he would ask two other air carriers flying between the United States and the United Kingdom - Delta and Virgin Atlantic - to also conduct passenger screenings.

Delta responded with a statement later on Monday that it would go along with Cuomo's request. "All Delta customers traveling from the UK to New York will be required to take a PCR test 72 hours prior to departure adding another layer of safety when they travel," a Delta spokesman said in a statement, CNBC reported. "Delta will work closely with the Governor's office in the coming days to implement his request."



UK Health Secretary Matt Hancock said last week that a new coronavirus strain had been identified in roughly 1,000 individuals in southeast England, named VUI-202012/01, which is believed to be more easily transmitted.

Cuomo said he had requested that New York be added to the list of 120 countries seeking to ban UK passengers who test positive for the latest coronavirus strain. The governor suggested all flights from the United Kingdom into the United States should be halted to prevent further infections.

"I call on the US government to do it. However, [if] you are landing on New York soil and you are landing in the state of New York and, therefore, I do have legal jurisdiction that I can assert. We should hold travel until we know what we're talking about and we know the facts and don't make the same mistake you made in the spring," Cuomo said.

The governor has warned for weeks of surging case counts reminiscent of the spring coronavirus outbreak that turned New York State into a hotspot for the pandemic. Cuomo has said New York remains in danger of a bigger outbreak at least until June of 2021 despite the availability of vaccines.

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US Restricts Export With 103 Russian, Chinese Entities Over Military Ties - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The United States has designated 45 Russian and 58 Chinese companies as foreign entities with military ties, thereby restricting export, re-export and transfers with them, the US Department of Commerce said in a press release.

"The Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) will amend the Export Administration Regulations (EAR) by adding a new 'Military End User' (MEU) List, as well as the first tranche of 103 entities, which includes 58 Chinese and 45 Russian companies," the release said on Monday.

Some of the designated Russian entities include the administration of the President of Russia, Ministry of Defense, Foreign Intelligence Service as well as Progress Rocket and Space Centre, Rosoboronexport, Rostec, Sukhoi, Tupolev, United Aircraft Corporation and Admiralty Shipyard. Other designated Russian entities include the Research Institutes of Russian Nuclear Energy State Corporation Rosatom, Saturn, the producer of engines for SSJ and MS-21 airliners, Rostec's United Engine Corporation, Irkut Research and the Production Corporation.

Among restricted Chinese entities are the Aero-Engine Company, Aviation Industry Corporation, Academy of Aerospace Solid Propulsion Technology, CAST Xi'an Spaceflight Engine Factory and Government Flying Service.

The designated entities will be prohibited from exporting US technology that would benefit Russian, Chinese and Venezuela military programs, the release said, adding that the new rule will be published in the Federal Register on Tuesday.

Exporters, re-exporters and transferors will need a license to export, re-export, or transfer in-country designated items to listed entities, the release said.

The list of designated companies may be expanded, or the already designated entities could be removed, depending on determinations made by the End-User Review Committee, which is made up of officials from the departments of Defense, Energy, State and Treasury.

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#### **Biden Gets Coronavirus Vaccine on Live TV**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - US President-elect Joe Biden on Monday received his first dose of the coronavirus vaccine on live television to assure Americans that inoculations were safe.

"I am doing this to demonstrate that people should be prepared when it's available to take the vaccine. There is nothing to worry about. I am looking forward for the second shot," Biden told reporters on Monday after receiving the vaccine.

Biden was accompanied by his wife Jill, who received a shot earlier on Monday.

Biden gave credit to the incumbent administration for fast-tracking vaccines development and distribution in the Operation Warp Speed. He also urged Americans to keep wearing face masks and practice social distancing during the upcoming holidays. "If you don't have to travel, don't travel," Biden said.

Transition spokesperson Jen Psaki said late last week that the Bidens were to get the Pfizer vaccine, which is administered in two doses and boasts 95 percent efficacy. Vice President-elect Kamala Harris and her husband, Doug Emhoff, are expected to receive the coronavirus vaccine next week.

Pfizer is currently one maker of two vaccines authorized for mass inoculations in the United States, the second one produced by Moderna.

Many US leaders, including Vice President Mike Pence, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, were given the vaccine last Friday and chose to publicize it to promote the vaccination campaign.

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#### **Authorities to Extend Stay-at-Home Orders in Parts of California - Governor**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - California is likely to extend the stay-at-home orders in pockets of the state that are hard hit by the coronavirus pandemic, Governor Gavin Newsom told reporters.

"We are likely, I think it's pretty self-evident, to extend those original stay-at-home orders announced three weeks back," Newsom told a live-streamed media briefing on Monday.



On Saturday, the Los Angeles KTLA5 network reported that more Californians are dying of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) now than at any other point during the nine-month long pandemic.

The California authorities have reported 1.9 million coronavirus cases and 22,675 virus-related deaths, according to data gathered by Johns Hopkins University. While deaths have average just over 2,500 per month since the start of the pandemic, the number has increased to 4,035 in the past month.

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#### SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik)

##### NEW US SANCTIONS AGAINST CUBA, NICARAGUA, CHINA

\* The United States has imposed new sanctions on three Cuban entities and three individuals from Nicaragua, the US Department of the Treasury announced on Monday.

\* US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced the United States has imposed new visa restrictions for Chinese officials suspected of being involved in the repression of a wide array of people, including political dissidents, ethnic minorities and religious figures.

##### RUSSIA-INDIA RELATIONS

\* India is interested in different Russian vaccines against COVID-19, not only Sputnik V, Russia's Ambassador in New Delhi Nikolay Kudashev said on Monday.

\* Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to India, initially scheduled for late 2020, may be arranged in the first six months of the coming year, Kudashev said.

\* Russia plans to sign long-term contracts for oil deliveries to India, for up to 25 years in advance, Kudashev said.

\* India may decide on the area for a new nuclear power plant based on a Russian design in 2021, Kudashev said.

##### CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC-RELATED DEVELOPMENTS

\* There were no coup attempts in the Central African Republic, rioters did not make it to Bangui, so the capital is calm, Russian ambassador to the country Vladimir Titorenko told Sputnik on Monday.

\* Titorenko, told Sputnik that there were no other Russian military in the Central African Republic, except for five employees of the Russian Defense Ministry's representative office in Bangui.

##### THE NAVALNY CASE

- \* The "investigation" of the opposition figure Alexey Navalny about alleged actions taken against him is a planned provocation, Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) said on Monday.
- \* Moscow has not received a response from the Technical Secretariat of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to a request for assistance in the situation with Navalny, the Russian Foreign Ministry said in a statement in connection with the reaction of the OPCW leadership to the request.

## CORONAVIRUS VACCINES

- \* The European Commission has authorized the use of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine against COVID-19 in the European Union, the commission's president, Ursula von der Leyen, said on Monday.
- \* The Moderna vaccine against the novel coronavirus has been deployed to hospitals in the US state of Connecticut and is being administered, local officials told reporters.
- \* Russian vaccine Sputnik V will be effective against both the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus mutation, which was identified in the UK, and against other mutations, Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) CEO Kirill Dmitriev said.
- \* The European Union did not take decisions at the supranational level on closing borders with the United Kingdom, restrictions on movement are in the national competence of the member states, a source in the Council of EU told reporters.

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## British Airways to Test Passengers Flying to New York for Latest Coronavirus Strain- Cuomo

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - British Airways will test UK passengers flying to New York for the latest strain of the novel coronavirus beginning tomorrow, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo said during a news conference on Monday.

"I want to thank British Airways. This was a very rapid decision by them. They could have taken a different path, but they agreed to be cooperative and they said they will not send flights to JFK [airport] unless those people have been tested pre-boarding," Cuomo said.

"There are two other airlines, Delta and Virgin, and I've requested for them to voluntarily agree [to the testing]."

UK Health Secretary Matt Hancock said last week that a new coronavirus strain had been identified in roughly 1,000 individuals in southeast England, named VUI-202012/01, which is believed to be more easily transmitted.

Cuomo said he had requested that New York be added to the list of 120 countries seeking to ban UK passengers who test positive for the latest coronavirus strain. The governor suggested all flights from the United Kingdom into the United States should be halted to prevent further infections.



"I call on the US government to do it. However, [if] you are landing on New York soil and you are landing in the state of New York and, therefore, I do have legal jurisdiction that I can assert. We should hold travel until we know what we're talking about and we know the facts and don't make the same mistake you made in the spring," Cuomo said.

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"I am doing this to demonstrate that people should be prepared when it's available to take the vaccine. There is nothing to worry about. I am looking forward for the second shot," Biden told reporters after a nurse administered an injection.

The president-elect was accompanied by his wife Jill, who received a shot earlier on Monday.

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The Russian entities include the Administration of the President of Russia, Ministry of Defence, Foreign Intelligence Service as well as Progress Rocket and Space Centre, Rosoboronexport, Rostec, Sukhoi, Tupolev, United Aircraft Corporation, Admiralty Shipyard, among others.

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#### **US Should 'Carefully Follow' Coronavirus Situation in UK, But Not Overreact - Fauci**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) – The United States should closely follow the latest developments regarding the novel coronavirus in the United Kingdom, but not overreact, National Institute of Allergies and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci said on Monday. “Follow it carefully, but don't overreact to it,” Fauci told CNN.

Fauci noted that he would not advise the White House to impose a flight ban on the United Kingdom.

Earlier on Monday, US Assistant Health Secretary Brett Giroir said the United States has not ruled out imposing a temporary travel ban on the United Kingdom in response to the mutated novel coronavirus spreading throughout the country.

On Saturday, the UK government put large parts of the country under another lockdown, after admitting that more than half of all new coronavirus cases have been caused by a mutated strain that can transmit up to 70-percent faster.

As UK citizens rushed out of the locked down areas ahead of Christmas, many trying to leave the United Kingdom, but numerous countries chose to close their borders.

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#### US Deploys Aircraft Carrier Off East Africa as 700 Troops leave Somalia - Navy Report

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The Department of Defense has stationed an nuclear-power aircraft carrier off the Horn of Africa as US Africa Command (AFRICOM) transfers 700 troops from Somalia to other parts of the continent, the US Naval Institute said in a report on Monday.

The nuclear carrier Nimitz, its escorts and the Amphibious Assault Ship Makin Island with the 15th Marine Expedition Amphibious Ready Group are on station and began operating in the region on Monday, the report said.

The group includes 2,500 Marines and a squadron of Marine F-35B Lightning II Joint Strike Fighters. The ships comprising the force left the South China Sea and sailed through the Strait of Malacca on December 12 entering the Indian Ocean, USNI News noted in a previous report last week.

Navy representatives from the US 5th and 6th Fleets said the ships were operating in the Middle East but did not provide additional information, the report said.

The Defense Department announced the departure of the troops earlier this month on order from the Trump administration, the report added.

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#### US Considers Legal Immunity for Saudi Crown Prince Accused in Assassination Plot - Report



WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The US government is considering granting Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman legal immunity from a lawsuit that has named him in an assassination plot, the Washington Post reported on Monday.

The lawsuit filed in the US District Court for the District of Columbia in August alleges the Saudi crown prince repeatedly sent death threats to Dr. Saad Aljabri, a former Interior Ministry official and adviser for Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, and sent a team of assassins to kill him in Canada.

The report cites legal documents related to the case and a State Department questionnaire sent to Aljabri's lawyers.

The lawsuit alleges that less than two weeks after the murder of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi a hit squad travelled to Canada but were foiled by Canadian customs officers who determined that the hit squad, comprised of members of bin Salman's personal mercenary group, the Tiger Squad, knew each other and were not tourists, as they initially claimed.

The complaint pointed to bin Salman's personal involvement in the conspiracy against Saad and alleges the plot against Aljabri has not been abandoned.

The former Saudi intelligence official is seeking unspecified compensation from the defendants, including bin Salman, 11 named participants in the conspiracy and 10 additional unnamed Saudi national, and alleged members of the Tiger Squad.

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US House Panel Subpoenas Health Secretary, CDC Chief in Probe Into Trump COVID-19 Response

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives' Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis has subpoenaed Health Secretary Alex Azar and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) chief Robert Redfield in order to obtain documents related to the Trump administration's handling of the coronavirus pandemic outbreak in the United States, the panel said in a letter Monday.

"The Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis issued subpoenas today compelling you to produce all of the documents requested by the Select Subcommittee on September 14, 2020, relating to efforts by political appointees at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to interfere with scientific work conducted by career officials at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)," the letter said.

Azar and Redfield are expected to submit all requested documents in full and unredacted form by December 30, the letter said.

The Subcommittee said it has obtained documents that showed political appointees in the Trump administration tried to influence scientific reports at CDC that showed "massive spread" of the virus because they did not align with the Trump administration's policies.

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#### **First Moderna Vaccine Arrives to Hospitals in US State of Connecticut - Officials**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) – The Moderna vaccine against the novel coronavirus has been deployed to hospitals in the US state of Connecticut and is being administered, local officials told reporters.

"Today, being the first in our state to deliver the Moderna vaccine, this is a shot for hope. This is truly a shot for hope," Hartford HealthCare Jeffrey Flaks President and CEO said during a press briefing.

Flaks said more than 20 health care personnel have agreed to receive the vaccine during the day.

Some 10,000 vaccines will be administered during the week and each vaccine station across Hartford HealthCare system will be able to serve about 100 persons per day, Flaks also said.

"Still early on gathering data but from epidemiology perspective we still believe that the vast majority of individuals who are infected are consistent with the strains at which this vaccine will protect us," Director for Infection Prevention Keith Grant said.

Connecticut Governor Ned Lamont said the Moderna vaccine was approved earlier in the day at the recommendation of the state's COVID-19 task force.

"We are expecting 63,300 doses of that vaccine this week," Lamont said, adding that Connecticut has already received more than 30,000 doses of the Pfizer vaccine.

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#### **Biden Team Says Widening National Economic Council to Accelerate Jobs Recovery**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - President-Elect Joe Biden's transition team said on Monday that it was adding three new members to its National Economic Council in an effort to help accelerate jobs recovery and rehabilitation from the coronavirus pandemic.

"Working families are struggling through the deepest, most inequitable economic and jobs crisis in modern history," Biden said in a statement issued by the team. "This is no time to build back the way things were before - this is the moment to build a new American economy that works for all."

The statement named Joelle Gamble as Special Assistant to the President for Economic Policy and David Kamin and Bharat Ramamurti as Deputy Directors of the National Economic Council.

"These seasoned public servants have the knowledge and experience to act quickly and decisively to address this economic crisis, responsibly open our economy, and put people back to work," Vice President-elect Kamala Harris said in the statement. "I look forward to working with them to create jobs and opportunity for all Americans."



More than 21 million Americans lost their jobs between March and April, at the height of lockdowns and other restrictive measures due to the coronavirus pandemic. A rebound of 2.5 million jobs was logged in May and 4.8 million in June, before the recovery began slowing. For both September and October, less than 700,000 jobs were added each month, and 245,000 in November.

The US economy itself shrank by 5 percent in the first quarter and a record 31.4 percent in the subsequent three months before rebounding by 33.1 percent in the third quarter.

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#### **Mutated Coronavirus Strain in UK Does Not Seem to Be More Pathogenic - US Health Official**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The mutated strain of the novel coronavirus detected in the United Kingdom shows no evidence of being more pathogenic, Operation Warp Speed chief advisor Moncef Slaoui said during a press briefing on Monday.

"There is no evidence, now it's clear because there's a large number of people infected, there's no evidence that this virus is more pathogenic, creates more problems... than the previous virus," Slaoui said.

The discovery of the new, more infectious novel coronavirus strain in the United Kingdom prompted many countries to temporarily shut their borders.

Earlier on Monday, US Assistant Health Secretary Brett Giroir said the United States has not ruled out imposing a temporary travel ban on the United Kingdom in response to the mutated novel coronavirus spreading throughout the country.

According to UK experts, the new strain can transmit up to 70 percent faster than the original coronavirus, albeit the data is lacking on whether or not it is more deadly.

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#### **US Imposes Additional Visa Restrictions on Chinese Officials - Pompeo**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed new visa restrictions on Chinese officials suspected of being involved in the repression of a wide array of people, including political dissidents, ethnic minorities and religious figures, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced on Monday.

"Today, I am announcing the imposition of additional restrictions under Section 212(a)(3)(C) of the Immigration and Nationality Act on the issuance of visas for Chinese officials who are believed to be responsible for, or complicit in, policies or actions aimed at repressing religious and spiritual practitioners, members of ethnic minority groups, dissidents, human rights defenders, journalists, labor organizers, civil society organizers, and peaceful protesters," Pompeo said.

Family members of officials engaged in such practices may also be subject to the additional restrictions, Pompeo added without specifying the new measures.

Pompeo said the undertaken measure demonstrates the US government's resolve to hold the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) accountable for their increasing repression against the Chinese people.

"Today's action creates additional restrictions applicable to all CCP officials engaged in such repressive activities, no matter their location," he said.

Pompeo noted earlier this year the United States imposed visa restrictions and financial sanctions on Chinese officials involved in the abuses in Xinjiang, restrictions on access to Tibet and the destruction of Hong Kong's promised autonomy."

China has repeatedly denied the accusations.

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#### **US Navy Sends Nuclear Missile Submarine, Cruisers to Persian Gulf - CENTCOM**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The Department of Defense has deployed a guided-missile-armed nuclear submarine to the Persian Gulf as part of a task force that also includes two guided missile cruisers, US Naval Forces Central Command (CENTCOM) announced on Monday.

"The nuclear-power Ohio-class guided-missile submarine USS Georgia along with the guided-missile cruisers USS Port Royal and USS Philippine Sea transited the Strait of Hormuz entering the Arabian Gulf [on] December 21," the announcement said.

The statement said that the submarine Georgia was operating according to international law within the US 5th Fleet area of operations.

"As an inherently flexible maneuver force, capable of supporting routine and contingency operations, Georgia's presence demonstrates the United States' commitment to regional partners and maritime security with a full spectrum of capabilities to remain ready to defend against any threat at any time," Naval Forces CENTCOM said.

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#### **US Attorney General Says He Does Not Plan to Appoint Special Counsel to Probe Hunter Biden**

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Outgoing US Attorney General William Barr told reporters on Monday that he does not intend to appoint a Special Counsel to investigate Hunter Biden.

"I think to the extent that there's an investigation, I think it's being handled responsibly and professionally, currently within the [Justice] Department, and to this point I have not seen a reason to appoint a Special Counsel and I do not plan to do so before I leave," Barr said. Hunter Biden announced earlier this month that the US Attorney's Office in Delaware is investigating his tax record.

US President Donald Trump had earlier publicly called on the US authorities to investigate Hunter Biden's alleged corrupt activities in Ukraine while he sat on Burisma's board of directors, and has warned that Hunter's questionable business dealings around the world and string of personal scandals could undermine President-elect Joe Biden and US national security. Trump has denied any involvement in the investigation.

Barr also shot down calls for government seizure of voting machines used in 2020 election, saying that he sees no reason for such a step, amid the Trump campaign and Republican-led efforts to scrutinize the presidential election results.

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US Charges Former Libyan Intelligence Officer in 1988 Lockerbie Bombing - Attorney General

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The United States has charged a former Gaddafi-era intelligence officer in the 1988 downing of Pan Am flight 103, outgoing US Attorney General William Barr announced on Monday.

In the ensuing years after the deadliest terrorist attack in British history that left 270 dead, including 190 Americans, the US filed criminal charges against two Libyan intelligence officers but a third, the bombmaker, who was only known as "Abu Agela Masud" eluded justice.

"I am pleased to announce that the United States has filed criminal charges against the third conspirator, Abu Agila Muhammad Mas'ud Kheir Al-Marimi, for his role in the bombing of Pan Am flight 103," Barr said during a press briefing.

Barr explained the break in the case came in 2016, when US officials learned that Masud revealed his role in the terror attack during interrogations in 2012 after he was captured following the overthrow of the Gaddafi government.

Washington will seek the former intelligence officer's extradition to stand trial in the United States and expressed confidence that Libyan officials will oblige the request, Barr said.

Pan Am flight 103 from Frankfurt to Detroit was destroyed by a bomb as it flew over the Scottish town of Lockerbie in December 1988. The attack claimed 270 lives, including 11 people on the ground. Libyan national Abdelbaset Megrahi was convicted of the attack.

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Barr Says 'Certainly Appears' Russians Behind Massive Hack of US Government Agencies



WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Russian hackers "certainly appear" to be behind the recently uncovered massive cyber hack on US government institutions, Attorney General William Barr told reporters on Monday.

"From the information I have... it certainly appears to be the Russians," Barr said, noting that he is in agreement with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who also accused Russia of the hack last week.

Barr said that he would not comment further on the issue regarding the massive hack.

On December 13, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) Warned that US federal, state and local governmental institutions, critical infrastructures and private entities face a grave threat as a result of the months-long cyber attack by an advanced persistent threat actor.

The Washington Post alleged that a group of hackers supposedly linked to Russian intelligence may be behind the intrusion but provided no evidence to back its claims. Russia's Embassy in Washington dismissed the accusations as unfounded.

On Saturday, President Donald Trump suggested that China rather than Russia may be behind the cyberattacks. Trump also said the true scale of the cyberattacks had been exaggerated by the media and the situation was under control.

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COVID-19 Relief Funds to Go Out to Americans By Next Week - Mnuchin

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Relief funds are expected to go out to Americans by next week once Congress ratifies the latest COVID-19 stimulus package agreed to by lawmakers, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said in an interview on Monday.

"We couldn't be more pleased that we got this done in time for the end of the year," Mnuchin told CNBC. "We'll be sending out next week direct deposits and I expect we'll get the money out by the beginning of next week. Twenty four hundred dollars for a family of four, much needed relief, just in time for the holidays."

Over the weekend, lawmakers agreed to a \$900 billion relief package, which is the second package after the \$3 trillion passed in March under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act.

Negotiations over the second package were held up for months as Republicans and Democrats disagreed over the details and size of the deal.

Mnuchin said the measure, which Congress will be voting on later on Monday and is expected to be signed by President Donald Trump, will include \$325 billion for small businesses. More than 21 million Americans lost their jobs between March and April, at the height of lockdowns and other restrictive measures imposed due to the novel coronavirus pandemic. A rebound of 2.5 million jobs was logged in May and 4.8 million in June, before the recovery began slowing. For both September and October, less than 700,000 jobs were added each month. In November, there were 245,000 additions.

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#### US Imposes Cuba, Nicaragua-Related Sanctions on 3 Entities, 3 Individuals - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on three Cuban entities allegedly controlled by the country's military and on three senior Nicaraguan officials, the US Department of the Treasury announced on Monday.

The Treasury Department Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) added to its Specially Designated Nationals list Grupo De Administracion Empresarial, described as an umbrella enterprise with interests in the tourism, financial investment, import/export, and remittance sectors of the Cuban economy; Financiera Cimex, a financial investment and remittance company; and the coffee company Kave Coffee.

The Treasury Department said the three companies have a Panamanian incorporation they use "to subvert international trade restrictions."

"The Trump administration remains committed to targeting the Cuban regime for its malign behavior and attempts to circumvent United States sanctions," Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said.

The Treasury Department also designated Nicaragua Supreme Court of Justice Vice President Marvin Ramiro Aguilar Garcia; National Assembly Deputy Walmaro Antonio Gutierrez Mercado; and Nicaraguan National Police Chief in Leon Fidel De Jesus Dominguez Alvarez.

The Treasury Department said the designations came in an effort to target government officials that continue to assist the President Daniel Ortega government's effort to undermine Nicaragua's democracy.

"The individuals designated today each are responsible for coopting judicial or financial reporting mechanisms to support the Ortega regime's systematic identification, intimidation, and punishment of political opposition," the Treasury Department said.

All their property of the designated entities and individuals in the United States will be blocked and the Americans are barred from any dealings with them.

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#### US Imposes Cuba-, Nicaragua-Related Sanctions Against 3 Entities, 3 Individuals - Treasury



WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The United States imposed new sanctions on three Cuban entities and three individuals from Nicaragua, the US Department of the Treasury announced on Monday.

The Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control added to the Specially Designated Nationals list Grupo De Administracion Empresarial, Financiera Cimex and Kave Coffee over their operations in Cuba.

The Treasury Department said it also designated three individuals - Aguilar Garcia, Dominguez Alvarez, Gutierrez Mercado - for Nicaragua-related sanctions.

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Cyber Hack Did No Damage to US Treasury's Classified Information - Mnuchin

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The Department of the Treasury did not suffer any damage to classified information from the recently-reported cyber hack on US institutions although the hackers attained some access to unclassified information, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said in an interview on Monday.

"At this point, we do not see any break in into our classified systems," Mnuchin told MSNBC.

"Our unclassified systems did have some access. I will say the good news is there's been no damage. Nor have we seen any large amounts of information displaced."

On December 13, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) Warned that US federal, state and local governmental institutions, critical infrastructures and private entities face a grave threat as a result of the months-long cyber attack by an advanced persistent threat actor.

The Washington Post alleged that a group of hackers supposedly linked to Russian intelligence may be behind the intrusion but provided no evidence to back its claims. Russia's Embassy in Washington dismissed the accusations as unfounded.

On Saturday, President Donald Trump suggested China rather than Russia may be behind the cyberattacks. Trump also said the true scale of the cyberattacks had been exaggerated by the media and the situation was under control.

Mnuchin said he was limited in what he could comment on the issue, but emphasized that the Treasury Department was working with the National Security Council and other intelligence agencies to safeguard its systems.

"I can assure you we are completely on top of this," Mnuchin added.

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US May Ban Travel From UK Over COVID-19 Strain - Assistant Health Secretary

WASHINGTON, Dec 21 (Sputnik) - The United States has not ruled out a temporary ban on travel from the United Kingdom in response to a mutated strain of the coronavirus, US Assistant Health Secretary Brett Giroir said in an interview on Monday.

Giroir stressed that as of now the US does not have any new updates, saying officials were still waiting for a recommendation from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on the matter.

"I think everything needs to be in the table. We need to look at the data, we need to examine the science, understand the risks and then make a decision. It will be based on evidence and data and what is best for the American people," Giroir said. "I think everything is possible."

UK Health Secretary Matt Hancock announced one week ago that a new strain of the disease had been identified in southeast England, and dozens of countries, including France and Russia, have enforced temporary bans on travel from the country over the past 24 hour

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Virginia's Statue of Confederate General Removed From US Capitol Building - Governor

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Virginia removed its statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee from the US Capitol building in Washington overnight, the state's Governor Ralph Northam announced in a press release on Monday.

"Governor Ralph Northam today announced that Virginia's statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee was removed from the United States Capitol overnight," Northam's office said in a press release.

The statue had stood for the last 111 years inside the Crypt of the US Capitol among 13 sculptures that commemorate the original 13 colonies of the United States.

Virginia will send another statue to replace the monument of Lee, and has chosen to instead commemorate Barbara Rose Johns, an African American civil rights leader who in 1951, at the age of 16, led a student strike to call for for equal education rights.

Johns's actions led to a lawsuit that became part of a larger case in the Supreme Court, "Brown versus the Board of Education," which resulted in a landmark ruling barring racial segregation in public schools as unconstitutional.

"The Confederacy is a symbol of Virginia's racist and divisive history, and it is past time we tell our story with images of perseverance, diversity, and inclusion. I look forward to seeing a trailblazing young woman of color represent Virginia in the US Capitol, where visitors will learn about Barbara Johns' contributions to America and be empowered to create positive change in their communities just like she did," Northam said in the release.

During the Civil War in the United States, Lee led the forces of the Confederacy - a group of southern states that believed the institution of slavery should be protected. Calls for the removal of monuments honoring Confederate figures have grown amid a nationwide anti-racism movement ignited by the May 25 death of African-American man George Floyd in police custody in Minneapolis.

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#### YEAR IN REVIEW - Trump Re-Election Bid Upended by Pandemic

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - A fierce struggle for the White House dominated US headlines in 2020, culminating in an election that saw historic turnout, a record number of mail-in votes amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and chaos sown by the incumbent's refusal to concede.

The 2020 election, pitting Republican President Donald Trump against Democratic challenger Joe Biden, was at its core a struggle for legitimacy. Since the day he was elected in 2016, adversaries accused Trump of being an illegitimate president based on charges that were later found to be baseless.

Four years later Republicans are peddling claims of large-scale vote fraud despite conclusions to the contrary by the Justice Department and several election security agencies. However, the only thing truly surprising about these developments is that Democrats would be surprised at the Republican strategy. Reciprocity, after all, is a natural law in politics.

Trump has embraced this principle until the bitter end, however, pushing allegations that voting machines were manipulated and the record deluge of mail-in ballots fueled widespread fraud. Even after the election results were officially certified by mid-December, effectively clearing the way for Joe Biden to occupy the White House on January 20, the president remained defiant. "Tremendous evidence pouring in on voter fraud. There has never been anything like this in our Country!" Trump said in a tweet on December 15, a day after the Electoral College met to officially confirm Biden's victory.

#### ACQUITTAL

The Democratic Party's initial strategy to ensure Trump would not be a threat in 2020 failed when the Senate acquitted the president of impeachment charges stemming from the prior year over allegations of freezing aid to Kiev in exchange for a probe of the Biden family's business dealings in Ukraine.

The Democratic-controlled House easily impeached Trump at the end of last year, but removing the president required 67 of 100 votes in the Republican-majority Senate. In the end, the Senate voted 52-48 to acquit Trump on the first article of impeachment charging him with abuse of power and 53-47 on the second article regarding obstruction of Congress.

Trump prevailed largely because impeachment is a political process and Republicans in the Senate saw no reason to take the risk of crossing party lines.

"The short answer is that there was nothing there. Even hyping the Ukraine/good, Russia/bad meme - to which virtually all [Republican] Senators subscribe - was insufficient to overcome Trump's popularity with the Republican voter base," former Senate Republican adviser Jim Jatras told Sputnik after the acquittal in February.



Trump, emerging stronger from the impeachment battle with his approval rating hitting a high of 49%, was now more prepared to focus on the race. Meanwhile, the Democratic primaries had kicked-off, which would ultimately end with the party consolidating around Biden as the safest pick.

## PANDEMIC, PROTESTS

With Trump surviving impeachment and Biden surviving the Democratic primaries, the two candidates were set for a general election collision of mammoth proportions amid two ongoing national crises. The pandemic and protests over police violence would have a profound impact on the 2020 race, with Trump drawing criticism on his handling of the former and Biden coming under fire for his reaction to the latter.

The United States under Trump's watch became the world leader in confirmed cases of COVID-19 - which has now infected about 17 million Americans. Critics have argued that the numbers could be much lower if the Trump took the crisis more seriously.

The Trump administration, instead of choosing to take any responsibility, decided to blame the crisis on China. The vicious campaign to smear Beijing included outrageous claims, top among them being that the virus came out of a Wuhan lab when, in fact, the genetic code released in January showed it was naturally derived.

In September, Trump controversially admitted that he knew the virus was a bigger threat than the way he represented it publicly, arguing that he had to show calm as the country's leader.

"You cannot show a sense of panic, or you can have bigger problems than you have had before," Trump told reporters in response to an audio clip released by a journalist from an interview earlier in the year revealing the president's admission.

Less than a month before election day Trump made matters worse by continuing to downplay the virus even after contracting it. After about a three-day hospital stay for COVID-19 treatment, Trump warned Americans not to be frightened of the pandemic because the United States has the best equipment.

"I'm back because I am a perfect physical specimen and I'm extremely young. And so I'm lucky in that way," Trump said.

Biden, in contrast, strictly followed the COVID-19 guidelines and called on Trump to listen to the scientists and do the same.

The pandemic of course directly affected the race because it fundamentally altered the voting process, with several states changing rules to expand mail-in or absentee voting. Because Democrats took the virus more seriously, the influx of mail-in ballots was expected to boost Biden. Trump, as a result, repeatedly claimed the mailed ballots would fuel widespread vote fraud.

The other major crisis that impacted the election, protests against police violence, turned into a double-edged sword for Trump. On one hand he was criticized for deploying federal agents to quell protests in several Democratic-run cities. On the other hand, polls showed independent voters were worried about the scenes of violence and looting, as Biden took heat for failing to immediately call on rioters to stop.

The national conventions in August showed how radically different the two candidates approached both crises. The Democratic Party held a nearly all-virtual affair where they promoted a message of racial equality.

Trump, in contrast, ran as the "law and order" candidate, warning Americans that Biden would allow radical anarchists to destroy the country. His remark came at a gala on the White House lawn with no social-distancing or masks to be seen.

## OTHER ELECTION ISSUES

The candidates sparred during two debates over a range of domestic issues such as immigration, tax cuts, trade and energy, among others. Trump threatened to harm Biden's chances in some rust belt battleground states by claiming the former vice president wanted to ban fracking. Biden did however suggest during one of the debates that he wanted to transition the US economy from fossil fuels.

The race was so dominated by domestic crises and issues, little attention was paid to any foreign policy issues outside of repeated exchanges about which candidate could be tougher on China.

Trump did try to contrast himself from Biden on foreign interventions, especially by underscoring how his administration struck a peace deal with the Taliban which activated a US troop exit from Afghanistan after 19 years. Trump has even attempted to accelerate the process and before the election vowed to bring all US troops home by Christmas.

There was also little time to focus on the typical foreign meddling claims. As the election neared, US intelligence leaders accused China, Russia, and Iran of obtaining voter registration data. Yet officials from all three countries denied the allegations and said they supported no particular candidate.

Scandals of course played a role in the race with the president and his allies hoping to pull a game-changing "October surprise," by capitalizing on Biden's alleged role in Hunter Biden's business dealings in Ukraine. Focus groups revealed that it had some impact among independent voters, who felt the media failed to appropriately cover the allegations.

## ELECTION DAY(S)

The US Electoral College format requires candidates to win statewide elections, not national popular vote. The winner of the election must secure at least 270 of 538 electoral votes that are apportioned across 50 states. For example, although Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by around 2% in 2016, she lost the election because Trump won more electoral votes.

The election boiled down to about 12 so-called battleground states, the biggest prizes being Texas, Florida, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Georgia. Although Biden held a national lead of 8% on the eve of the election, the margins in key swing states were much tighter.

The first wave of election results pouring in on November 3 looked positive for Trump, especially when he was projected to win Florida.

Trump was trailing Biden in projected electoral votes but was leading in five out of six critical states before the night ended with both candidates declaring victory.

"I'm here to tell you tonight we believe we're on track to win this election," Biden said at a press conference.

At his presser, Trump took the stage to the tune of "Hail to the Chief" a song played at presidential inauguration ceremonies.

"This is a fraud on the American public - this is an embarrassment to our country," Trump said in the early hours of November 4. "We were getting ready to win this election, frankly, we did win this election."

Trump said his campaign was going to the US Supreme Court to halt the vote count.

"We will be going to [the] US Supreme Court. We want all voting to stop. We don't want them to find any ballots at 4 o'clock in the morning and add them to the list," Trump said.

Many Trump supporters were severely disappointed on November 5, considering before they went to sleep the prior night it appeared their candidate was on track to win pivotal states and had a clear path to victory. However, most of some 65 million mail-in ballots had yet to be counted. The fact states continued to receive and count mail-in ballots after the actual election day, only helped fuel fraud claims and spark protests.

In any event, four days later every US media outlet projected Biden the winner of the election the moment he captured the tipping point state of Pennsylvania. Most outlets had him securing at least 290 electoral votes with the state of Georgia still too close the call. After several recounts Georgia would eventually fall to Biden weeks later.

Biden would ultimately end up capturing a record 81.2 million votes overall, more than 51% of the total, to Trump's 74.2 million (47%). More importantly, Biden ended up winning 306 electoral votes, which represented 56% of the total.

The 2020 election also set the all-time record for total votes cast with nearly 160 million, about 20% more than 2016.

## DIAGNOSIS

Of all the factors identified, Trump's behavior in the face of the pandemic might have been the largest contributing factor to his failure. Even his allies admitted the crisis, which also erased historic economic gains, led to his downfall.

"If he loses, it's going to be because of covid," Ronna McDaniel, chairwoman of the Republican National Committee, said shortly before Election Day.

In March, a Navigator Research poll showed 53% of Americans supported Trump's handling of the crisis, a level that would plummet 26 percent by October.

Post-election analyses revealed that Trump lost votes in large suburban areas in key battleground states, especially among women. Going into election night, both campaigns knew Trump would likely continue to perform strongly in rural areas and smaller suburbs while Biden would dominate in urban areas. Hence, voters in large suburbs just outside the big cities were seen as potentially decisive in many states. Trump's mishandling of the pandemic may have tilted the balance in Biden's favor in suburbia.

According to a New York Times analysis, Biden improved on Hillary Clinton's performance in 373 suburban counties by nearly 5 points, which helped him prevail in the key Midwestern states of Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin as well as Arizona and Georgia. Although the



overall movement in the suburbs was not massive, a slight nudge is all Biden needed in these states where his gap with Trump ended up being razor-thin.

Minorities voted in record numbers in Democratic strongholds in all of these states, especially the urban areas, although Trump, remarkably, defied expectations by improving his performance among Blacks and Hispanic voters.

With respect to pre-election polls, although they were accurate in projecting Biden as the winner, the surveys once again underestimated support for Trump, largely because his base distrusts pollsters. On election eve, most polls had Biden ahead nationally by 8%, yet he ended up winning by less than 5 percent.

The top three poll aggregators were inflated in Biden's favor in 11 of the top 12 battleground states by an average of more than 5 percent.

The polls were also considerably off in the congressional races, where the Democrats expected to expand the number of seats controlled in the House and secure more than 50 seats in the 100-member Senate, neither of which happened.

## POST-ELECTION CRUSADE

Shortly prior to the election, Trump fast-tracked confirmation of Supreme Court pick Amy Coney Barrett because he felt the election would be decided before the high court. His prediction was accurate, but he would end up disappointed with the ultimate ruling.

Trump repeatedly claimed massive fraud took place despite the fact several US federal and state election security agencies said the 2020 vote was the safest in US history. Moreover, Trump's own Justice Department said they found no fraud at a scale that would affect the results.

Bill Boerum a former state of California Election Inspector, predicted – accurately - that the 2020 US presidential election would be "the most litigated" in American history.

At the center of Trump's objections was the unprecedented amount of mail-in ballots. Several states moved the mail-in ballot deadline, which many Republicans felt was unconstitutional. However, courts at every level disagreed with the Trump campaign's legal arguments. Voting rights advocacy group Democracy Docket said the Trump campaign and its allies, as of December 14, had lost 59 of 60 lawsuits filed to reverse the results in at least six battleground states.

Trump's crusade at times bordered on the Lovecraftian. At one press conference the president's personal attorney, Rudy Giuliani -with hair dye running down both of his cheeks – claimed foreign powers had manipulated election systems to flip votes from Trump to Biden.

The dagger through the heart of Trump's cause may have been a Supreme Court decision on December 11. The high court's decision was effectively unanimous – with all three Trump-appointed justices siding with the majority.

The decision prompted a backlash in Trumpdom, with Texas Republican Party Chairman Allen West calling on states to secede from the Union. The setback did not change the president's outlook.

"The Supreme Court really let us down. No Wisdom, No Courage!" Trump said in a tweet after the ruling.

Trump's court challenges also hindered the beginning of the transition process, although the president agreed to allow some of the procedures to begin. Biden, for his part, generally ignored Trump's lawsuits and has already named several cabinet ministers, many of whom have troubling track records.

#### BIDEN'S AGENDA AND THE FUTURE OF TRUMPDOM

Biden on the campaign trail has made clear that he will differ from Trump in terms of both substance and style, beginning with reversing many of the president's decisions to exit treaties. Biden said he wants to see the US reenter the Paris climate accord and the Iran nuclear deal and wants to extend the New START treaty. Biden also plans to end Trump's travel ban and rollback other stringent immigration-related policies.

However, some of his top cabinet picks, including Antony Blinken as Secretary of State, have track records of supporting interventions in Syria, Libya, Afghanistan and Ukraine, among others. Former UK ambassador to Syria Peter Ford believes Biden's cabinet selection means the US may escalate interference in Syria and elsewhere.

"The scene is set for more counter-productive US belligerence and interference in the Middle East," Ford told Sputnik after Biden announced Blinken would be his top diplomat.

Meanwhile, despite the outcome of the 2020 election, Trump himself – and the phenomenon known as Trumpism - will not be going away anytime soon. Trump at a rally in early December did not rule out a 2024 presidential run and predicted that the Republican Party would seize the House in 2022.

Trump has also been involved in trying to shape two runoff senate races that will affect who controls the US Senate. The Democrats need to win at least one of the races to secure 50 seats, which gives them an effective majority because the vice president will play the role of tiebreaker in votes.

Former Green Party vice presidential candidate Ajamu Baraka told Sputnik that he believes Trump could exert more influence on US politics even in defeat, potentially complicating any efforts at uniting the country.

US Congressman Jim Banks, the next head of the Republican Study Committee – a caucus of social conservatives - said Trumpism will certainly persist despite the election result.

"Trump taught us how to fight and win with an agenda that appeals to a popular base," Banks told reporters after the election. "House conservatives must follow his example and carry the Trump message the next two years."

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Ontario to Start Province-Wide Lockdown on December 26 - Premier

TORONTO, December 21 (Sputnik) - The Canadian province of Ontario will go into a lockdown effective December 26 amid a steady rise in new novel coronavirus cases, Premier Doug Ford announced on Monday.

"Ontario will enter a province-wide shutdown starting at 12:01 a.m. [5:01 a.m. GMT] on December 26," Ford said during a press briefing.

Ford explained that the lockdown is necessary to avoid overwhelming the public health system. Ontario is logging over 2,000 cases daily and new projections indicate the province could see over 6,000 cases by January if current trends continue.

Provincial authorities will monitor the progression of the pandemic over the next 14 days in Northern Ontario and 28 in Southern Ontario before determining the next course of action, a provincial press release said.